

Pearse's 'sex obsession with Emmet's corpse'

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HIS supposed homosexuality has been hotly debated, but Pdraig Pearse's most bizarre fantasy could never have been consummated - his obsession with the corpse of Robert Emmet.

A controversial new biography that will infuriate conservative historians as well diehard republicans once again delves into the secret lives of national icons.

Pearse, it is alleged, was obsessed with the corpse of Robert Emmet, a man beheaded 75 years before the leader of the Easter Rising was born.

And it's further claimed in a biography published to coincide with the bicentenary of the 1803 rebellion that Pearse had necrophilic thoughts about Emmet's lover, Sarah Curran.

The Irish republican movement in general has a "mesmerisation with death, violence and the blood sacrifice," 'Pearse's fascination with Emmet was more than just an admiration for the hero who had sacrificed all for the national ideal'

thanks to the Emmet legend, which has tragic romance and youthful virility as central themes, according to the book's author, Professor Marianne Elliot.

"Pearse's fascination with Emmet was more than just an admiration for the hero who had sacrificed all for the national ideal. He provides the best-known example of necrophilia in the making of the Emmet legend, Emmet . . . taking pride of place in the 'homoeroticism' of his writings," she says.

Professor Elliot, who is director of the Institute of Irish Studies at Liverpool University, told an international Emmet conference last week she believed Pearse had misappropriated the Emmet legacy and used it for his own personal and political agendas.

When Pearse moved his private school, St Enda's, to Sarah Curran's former family home at Rathfarnham, his morbidly devout Catholicism allowed his admiration for Robert Emmet to become an obsession.

Elliot says: "Here Pearse became haunted by the love story. He believed their spirits survived in the places where they lived. He imagined the presence of Sarah Curran and Emmet in its grounds and rooms, and pictured the 'young, slight figure' of Emmet . . . his 'noble head' . . . 'bent a little upon his breast'".

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However, there is no evidence to suggest that Pearse's images of Emmet bear any resemblance to his actual appearance, according to the new biography, Robert Emmet: the Making of a Legend.

Biographies of Pearse himself have challenged traditional accounts of the 1916 hero with many now presuming he was gay. However, the Emmet legend has never been seriously questioned by the public at large, Elliot says.

The most popular portrait of the leader of the 1803 rebellion was drawn almost 50 years after his execution, which took place on Thomas Street, Dublin, 200 years ago this Saturday. Emmet's youth and virility were central to the legend which grew through writing and song after his death. It is likely that artists enhanced Emmet's appearance to fit the legend.

Elliot says Pearse himself exaggerated sexual violence suffered by another protagonist in the Emmet romance, Anne Devlin. Pearse described the torture of Emmet's 16-year-old housekeeper in a New York speech, saying: "They pricked her breasts with bayonets until the blood spurted out in their faces." Elliot says there is no historical evidence to support this graphic description.

Her book suggests blood sacrifice mesmerises republicans thanks to the Emmet legend, which has a strong necrophilic element.

The Emmet symposium, hosted by Trinity College, heard from speakers who suggested the republican icon also influenced Oscar Wilde and Woodrow Wilson. However, Elliot's paper was the most controversial, with her theories taking the understanding of Pearse's homoeroticism to a new level.

The Easter Rising leader, along with Roger Casement and Eoin O'Duffy, is amongst key figures of the Irish independence movement who are considered to have been homosexual. While recently authenticated diary entries suggest Casement had sex with boys, it is not clear whether Pearse ever had homosexual relations with another man.

Emmet's request to be buried in an unmarked grave, made during his famous trial speech, and the dispute about where his decapitated body was laid to rest, meant Pearse could never have consummated his necrophilic urges.

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